IS ELECTION BAD FOR YOU?

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Introduction

The concept of election, understood as the proposition that in Israel's scriptures God chooses some (Israel/Jews) but not others (nations/Gentiles), has not generally—to put it mildly—found much favour in modern Western thought. A classic critique, articulated especially in the eighteenth century, is that election represents something tribal, parochial and blinkered and that such narrowness is incompatible with belief in one God, who must be a God for all. Enlightenment thinkers regularly predicated such tribalism of Judaism in order to contrast it, to its severe detriment, with the universalism of Christianity; or alternatively, better still, with the universalism of a 'natural' religion in which all particular (or, in eighteenth-century terminology, 'positive', i.e. humanly posited) religious traditions were judged by the yardstick of monotheistic purity in deist dress, and found more or less wanting. In this seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scenario, election came to be considered as unambiguously a Bad Thing. 'Monotheism',[1] however, was a Good Thing, and the strong approbation attached to it was a prime reason why election was so bad.

However, the self-evident value attached to a monotheism that was to ever-increasing degrees detached from its biblical frame of reference and context of meaning was to prove short lived. Although in 1794 Robespierre could still enthusiastically celebrate a festival to the Supreme Being as an intrinsic part of the new order introduced by the French Revolution, by the 1840s Feuerbach argued that 'God' is solely a symbolic coding of the human, a

1. I use scare quotes because 'monotheism' as an interpretative category is highly problematic (among other reasons, being rooted in the same soil which gave rise to deism). See R. Walter L. Moberly, 'How Appropriate is "Monotheism" as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?', in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (ed. Loren Stuckenbruck and Wendy North; JSNTSup, 263; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), pp. 216-34; also Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'* (FAT, 2/1; Tübingen: Mohr–Siebeck, 2003), esp. Chapter 1.

representation of human ideals 'on the big screen' (as it were).[2] Moreover the desirability of those human ideals represented by 'God' came in for increasing and suspicious scrutiny from a variety of angles, most famously on the part of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche—self-interest, self-deception and the manipulation and oppression of others became characteristics of belief in 'God'.

By the early twenty-first century the problematic nature of belief in a sole deity, and any corresponding belief in humans as in any way 'chosen' by that deity, can be widely taken for granted and compared, to its severe detriment, with other religious and secular conceptualities. One characteristic sign of the times is that essays and books whose titles and content link 'monotheism' with 'violence' are on the increase.[3] Typical of many is prize-winning novelist Philip Pullman. In an interview, when asked about his apparent antipathy towards God and the Church in his novels, Pullman explains his attitude as follows:

> Well, all right, it comes from history. It comes from the record of the Inquisition, persecuting heretics and torturing Jews and all that sort of stuff; and it comes from the other side, too, from the Protestants burning the Catholics. It comes from the insensate pursuit of innocent and crazy old women, and from the Puritans in America burning and hanging the witches—and it comes not only from the Christian Church but also from the Taliban.
>
> *Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him. Wherever you look in history, you find that. It's still going on.*[4]

Or, from within a biblically rooted faith, the British Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, began a recent article:

> Since September 11, many reflective people have wondered whether there is something not just about fundamentalism but about religion itself, specifically monotheism, that gives rise to violence in the name of God. This is an old claim but an important one, and we must face it honestly.[5]

2. His classic work is *The Essence of Christianity* (trans. George Eliot; with introduction by Karl Barth and foreword by H. Richard Niebuhr; New York: Harper, 1957).

3. One notable example, among many, in the biblical sphere is Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago University Press, 1997), which I have discussed in my 'Is Monotheism Bad for You? Some Reflections on God, the Bible, and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*', in *The God of Israel* (ed. Robert P. Gordon; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 94-112.

4. *Third Way* 25/2 (April 2002), pp. 22-26; reprinted in *Church Times* 5 April 2002, pp. 14-15; italics added.

5. 'Credo', *The Times*, 20 April 2002. When Sacks refers to this as an 'old' claim, I am not sure exactly what pedigree he envisages. To the best of my knowledge, the first modern to argue that monotheism is inherently intolerant and violent was David Hume in the eighteenth century (an issue on which he was ahead of his contemporaries). See especially his *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), Chapter 9, where we read, for

And so it has come to pass that in much contemporary thought monotheism, no less than election, is a Bad Thing.

The purpose of this short and very broad-brush sketch of the history of ideas is to try to indicate something of the context which is faced by the contemporary Jew or Christian who seeks to understand Israel's scriptures in ways that are both faithful to the nature and meaning of those texts and also open to appropriation by (would-be) believers today. Because, in certain fundamental ways, the integrity and legitimacy of Jewish and Christian faiths are at stake, there is a renewed urgency to discover what is, and is not, the intrinsic significance and enduring legacy of those ancient texts that are held sacred and believed to be in some way revelatory of the one true God.

In order to try to make some progress, I would like to do two things in this paper, and to attempt them with something of the kind of heuristic and perhaps provocative mode that Walter Brueggemann himself uses so fruitfully. First, I will fill out certain aspects of my introductory sketch through a brief reflection on a prime passage within Israel's scriptures, the Shema (Deut. 6.4-9). This will be so as to recognize that the linkage between 'one God' and election is not only close but is also indeed *prima facie* open to characteristic contemporary objection, for the Shema is closely followed by Moses' requiring the practice of *herem* ('holy war'); though I will also suggest that the implications of Deuteronomy are less clear-cut than is sometimes imagined. Secondly, I will propose one specific theological conceptuality as a constructive way ahead, I hope, for rethinking what election does, and does not, entail.

God, Election and Violence: A Case Study

Within Israel's scriptures a certain kind of belief in God, whether or not it qualifies precisely as 'monotheism' (in terms of modern categorizing), and a certain understanding of human identity and vocation, i.e. election, are indeed closely interrelated concepts. To affirm that there is a deity who can appropriately be characterized as 'one' entails on the part of those who would make that affirmation that their self-understanding and appropriate mode of living is bound up with commitment to that deity.

As Israel's keynote text, the Shema (Deut. 6.4-9) puts it, YHWH is 'one' (*'ehad*)—where 'one' is best understood in the light of Song of Songs 6.8-9 to mean 'one and only', in the relational sense of the sole appropriate recipient of love and devotion; so it is natural that the text continues with the requirement that Israel should love YHWH fully and unreservedly.[6] This

example: 'The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists' (*Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* [ed. J.C.A. Gaskin; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], p. 162).

6. Here and in what follows I draw on my essay 'Toward an Interpretation of the

naturally entails for Israel a self-identity and praxis fundamentally oriented to sustaining the recognition expressed in this confession and response, which is the basic thrust of vv. 6-9 in relation to vv. 4-5; the all-important understanding and requirement is to be constantly pondered, recited, taught, written and displayed.

Moreover it is hardly accidental that the *locus classicus* about YHWH as 'one' is closely followed in the next chapter by the *locus classicus* about Israel as the chosen people of YHWH (7.6-8), with one of the conceptually foundational uses of the specific verb 'choose' (*bahar*, 7.6b). Here, the love (*'ahab*) that Israel is to show to YHWH (6.5) is seen to be rooted in YHWH's antecedent love (*'ahab*) for Israel and antecedent commitment to their ancestors (7.8). The nature of Israel's elect status is further spelled out through the term 'holy' (*qadosh*, 7.6a).[7]

However, Israel's elect status also provides the basis for the uncompromising practice of *herem* ('holy war') towards seven other nations who reside in the land that YHWH is giving to Israel (7.1-5). Deuteronomy 7.6 begins with *ki*, 'for', in a way that makes unambiguous that election is specified here so as to underwrite the just-mentioned practice of *herem*.[8] Moreover the NRSV, typical among recent translations, translates the verbal form of *herem* (v. 2b), which depicts what Israel is to do to these other nations, as 'destroy'. Here we must surely have the supreme *prima facie* biblical warrant for the contemporary anxiety that 'monotheism' and election are bad for you: Israel's confession in the Shema that God is 'one'—noble in isolation or when recontextualized as in classic Jewish practice—is in its biblical context linked to a conception of election which entails murderous violence towards others.[9] As,

Shema'', in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 124-44. See also MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, Chapters 2–3.

7. It is also worth asking what the related affirmations about YHWH and Israel imply for the nature of theological language. In much biblical scholarship religious affirmations are treated as essentially human constructions, expressions of ideological convictions in relation to particular ancient situations of conflict. No doubt, on one level they are that. But what (conceptually and existentially) might be needed to understand 'YHWH is one' and 'YHWH has chosen Israel' as—also—expressing authentic insight into something of the nature and purposes of the true God in relation to human existence, i.e. in traditional terminology, as 'revelation'?

8. Even if one were attracted to the hypothesis that 7.1-5 is a 'later accretion' and the 'for' of 7.6 initially justified the observances in 6.20-25 (so, e.g., Yair Hoffman, 'The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem', *ZAW* 111 [1999], pp. 196-210 [202]), one would still need to give an account of the logic of the text in its received form.

9. The linkage between YHWH's election of Israel (7.6-8) and *herem* (7.1-5) and the Shema (6.4-9) is for some reason only rather rarely brought to attention in the literature of commentary.

for example, Gerd Lüdemann puts it (in the course of a more general discussion of Deuteronomy):

> The Holy War...and the message of Deuteronomy, are loaded with violence, and those responsible for them wanted in their minds to exterminate whole peoples in the name of God... Its content is the claim to exclusiveness made by an intolerant deity or, more precisely, the image of an intolerant God who chooses Israel...[10]

Although the issues are complex, I would for now make four brief observations. First, the seven nations of 7.1 appear to be impossible to place on a map as Israel's predecessors or neighbours in Canaan. This suggests that they may primarily be symbolic of the adjacent non-Israelite world more widely; less particular actual targets than one generalized symbolic target.[11] Secondly, it is surely an error to translate the verbal form of *herem* (7.2b) as 'destroy', for Deuteronomy has other verbs to express this meaning (*hishmid*, *he'ebid*), and the conceptuality of *herem* is on any reckoning more complex than 'destroy'. I am not sure what is a good translation, but something like 'put under the ban' has the merit of being opaque in the kind of way that prevents the contemporary reader from too readily assuming that the meaning of the word is understood. Thirdly, one can read the Deuteronomic text as initially specifying the practice of *herem* (7.2a,bα) and then giving content to its meaning in what follows (7.2bβ-5)—that is, as a kind of definitional exposition of *herem*. To put it crudely, since corpses present no temptation to intermarriage, the text envisages the continuance of non-Israelites in close proximity to Israel.[12] So it is likely that *herem* is understood here as a *metaphor* for unqualified allegiance to YHWH, an allegiance to be realized in two specific practices: negatively, the avoidance of intermarriage (7.3-4) and, positively, the destruction not of people but of those objects that symbolize

10. *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1997), pp. 55-75 (73).

11. As Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 94, himself puts it, 'the list of seven nations is an archaic slogan that represents, in context, any alien culture with its religious temptations for Israel'.

12. Similar, in all likelihood, is Deut. 12.29-30 which envisages Israel, in the promised land after other nations have been dispossessed, being tempted to look into the way these dispossessed nations worship their deities. The 'inconsistent' logic of the text is, I suggest, often tacitly 'corrected' by translators who render the question 'How do these nations serve their gods?' by 'How did these nations serve their gods?' or 'How did these nations use to serve their gods?' (so S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902], p. 150, with appeal to the imperfect in 11.10). Yet the *yiqtol* form of *ya'abdu* perhaps most naturally signifies open-ended action in the present, as in 12.31b; cf. the imperfect in 5.24b; 8.3b, 5; 10.17b; and even 11.10 envisages practices which were presumably still continuing in the time of the speaker, even if not on the part of the Israelites.

and enable allegiances to deities other than YHWH (7.5).[13] Fourthly, one must ask how this language is likely to have been understood in Deuteronomy's likely (or least unlikely) context of composition and initial reception, in the seventh and sixth centuries.[14] At those times it is most unlikely that extensive warfare against other nations (especially if as diverse as 7.1 depicts them) could have been considered as at all a meaningful option, if it entailed military action on the battlefield.

The point is that, whether or not there was once an actual practice of *herem* on the battlefield, Deuteronomy appears to retain, and indeed privilege, the notion of *herem* only because it was seen to lend itself to a particular metaphorical usage for practices appropriate to enabling Israel's everyday allegiance to YHWH. If this is at all on the right lines, then Deuteronomy adumbrates a recurrent (though not unvarying) characteristic of the faiths rooted in the Bible in their attitude towards practices and understandings that become problematic: metaphorical reconstrual. One might note that when Jesus speaks in strong, indeed violent, language about the need for undivided allegiance to God and avoidance of sin—'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut if off and throw it away...' (Mt. 5.29-30//Mk 9.43-48)—interpreters have no difficulty in recognizing the metaphorical usage, in a way that does not undermine but rather constitutes taking the text seriously. What if Deuteronomy was already doing something comparable?[15]

To be sure, the conceptuality of the text, even when read as metaphor, still jars on the ears of those accustomed to interfaith dialogue, multiculturalism and more individualistic approaches to marriage options; and there are good moral and theological reasons, both within the scriptural canon and in historic Jewish and Christian thought, for resisting any facile replication of the text's rhetorical strategy concerning nearby or problematic 'others'. But the concern within Deuteronomy is that Israel is a recidivist, so strongly attracted to allegiances other than to YHWH (the constant problem of 'other gods') that

13. I realize that in making this suggestion I am pressing the precise wording of the text (what it does and does not say), and the logic of what is necessary for intermarriage to be a live issue, in a way that could be argued to be insensitive to wider rhetorical considerations. I am grateful to my former doctoral student Joel Lohr for putting this point to me, even though I have not (yet?) changed my mind.

14. Although we cannot date Deuteronomy precisely, I am happy to go along with a conventional late monarchic and/or exilic dating as probably the least unlikely options.

15. Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, p. 99, is doubtful about a symbolic construal of *herem* language, but nonetheless offers an account of Deut. 7 as a whole that is, I think, entirely congruent with my proposal, insofar as the text is concerned that 'living as a covenantal community with an intentional social ethic rooted in holiness may become impossible if there are not those who can withstand the pressures and seductions of the surrounding society'.

strong language and action become necessary. In a modern idiom, Israel within Deuteronomy is like an alcoholic undergoing therapy in Alcoholics Anonymous, where the only appropriate response to alcoholic drink is to keep away from it and, if necessary, get rid of it. There are difficult problems of allegiance and practice here which still, *mutatis mutandis*, confront contemporary believers who would live in ways that are faithful to God.

We may also observe that in the earliest explicit interpretative engagement with Deut. 7 that has been preserved, the narrative of Ezra 9–10—where the narrative is set in motion through the citation of Deut. 7.1 in Ezra 9.1[16]—the issues are posed entirely in terms of Israel's *separation* from other peoples to preserve holiness through the abolition of intermarriage. There is no hint of any notion that other peoples should be put to death, or that the text requires anything other than separation through avoiding intermarriage. Although, to be sure, one might observe that warfare would not be a feasible option in the Persian context, the key point is the complete lack of any sense within the Ezra account that anything other than separation is entailed by the Deuteronomic prescription to which reference is made.

With this I am proposing a rather different hermeneutic from that which has often been characteristic of mainstream Judaism and Christianity. Moshe Greenberg, for example, depicts a classic rabbinic tendency to construe the *herem* legislation as addressed to one specific generation in one specific context in such a way that it does not apply also to subsequent generations.[17]

> Now, had there been any inclination to generalize this law, it would have been easy for the talmudic sages to perform an appropriate hermeneutical exercise to that end.
>
> But in fact the sages left the ancient *herem* law as they found it: applying to seven extinct nations, while radically meliorating other terms of the obsolete law. The rabbis adjusted its meaning to their moral sentiment. Since Deuteronomy expressly grounded the *herem* in the warning 'lest you learn their evil ways and they cause you to sin to the Lord', the rabbis concluded, reasonably enough, that if the Canaanites reformed they should be allowed to remain. The

16. The citation is not verbatim, and the list of nations is changed. Apart from technical issues here (see the commentaries), the Ezra citation seems to embody a contemporizing of the text, with reference also to other portions of *torah*, which would fit well with Deut. 7.1's intrinsic significance as symbolically depicting problematic 'others'.

17. A comparable move is made by Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 78: 'The effect of the canonical shaping of the conquest material is that the book of Joshua has been assigned a specific, but time-bound, role in God's economy. The conquest continued to be acknowledged throughout the Old Testament as an integral part of the divine purpose for Israel, but it was never to be repeated. It was theologically rendered inoperative by being consigned wholly to the past.'

> moral sensibility of postbiblical Judaism cancelled the indiscriminate, inevitable application of the *herem* (which is the plain sense of Scripture).[18]

One can hardly not sympathize with the rabbis—and if my own proposal be found unpersuasive they offer a ready alternative. Nonetheless, my question is whether the 'plain sense of Scripture' is really so plain, and whether the 'appropriate hermeneutical exercise' which the rabbis declined to perform might not already have been performed by those responsible for Deuteronomy. And of course, the retention of community identity and allegiance through strong disapproval and discouragement of marrying outside the community has in fact been common among both Jews and Christians down the ages, even if it has not been understood as an appropriation of *herem* legislation.

To be sure, my proposal about Deuteronomy 7 is unlikely to be found persuasive unless it can be shown to make sense also of that biblical narrative which most embodies its perspectives, both its language and its conceptuality, that is Joshua 1–12. For the present I would simply note that the well-known difference of portrayal between Joshua 1–12 and Judges 1–2 in terms of the implied occupants of Canaan, and also the well-known archaeological difficulties in relation to Joshua 1–12, together point to the likelihood that it is inappropriate to read the Joshua narrative as anything like 'history' in a modern sense, rather than perhaps as some kind of 'legend' (though all these labels are too polyvalent to be very useful). It may be that the stories of conquest are a narrative backdrop for exploring aspects of what is specified in YHWH's speech to Joshua that opens the book, Israel entering its inheritance (YHWH's gift of Canaan) via attentiveness to *torah*.[19] The account of entering the inheritance can be read as a metaphor for Israel's struggle to implement and follow *torah* in its regular life in the promised land. This general approach has already been explored in a preliminary way by Robert Polzin, who proposes that in reading Joshua 2–12 we should 'expect that the Deuteronomist's own description and interpretation of the events that comprised the occupation

18. 'On the Political Use of the Bible in Modern Israel: An Engaged Critique', in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Festschrift Jacob Milgrom* (ed. D.P. Wright *et al.*; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 461-71 (469-70).

19. A possible analogy might be the 1997 film, *Titanic*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. Here the primary focus is not really the sinking of the ship but rather the love story, for which the ship's voyage and sinking is the backdrop—which does, of course, colour the love story in particular ways. For a reading of the Joshua narrative as an exploration of the paradoxical boundaries of Israel's identity—where the paradoxes are sharpened by the narrative backdrop of apparently polarizing warfare, see Douglas Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* (JTI Supplements, 2; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010).

of the land will be *his* attempt to declare and teach what this "law of Moses" as the word of God means'.[20]

Obviously, there is more to be done here. My present concern is to ask whether the supposition that these Deuteronomic texts endorse actual violence on Israel's part towards its neighbours may not in fact be a 'strong misreading' of their forceful rhetoric.[21] Although, to be sure, it is a misreading not restricted to the contemporary context, many today seem to find it apparently self-evident perhaps because it is so congenial. On the one hand, there are those who wish to harness God and the Scriptures to their self-promoting purposes, often of a nationalist and/or militarist kind.[22] On the other hand, there are secularists who claim the moral high ground in denouncing the regressive mentality and practices promoted by biblically rooted belief in God, and who seek to expose such so as to disable them. What is common to both sides is an approach to the biblical text which is distinctly wooden ('literalist'), too hermeneutically impatient to attend properly to the interpretative disciplines implicit in good reading of a canonical collection, where traditions and texts have been recontextualized in certain ways so as to enable them to be of enduring significance.[23] Whether or not my proposal for the metaphorical construal of *herem* language be found persuasive, this more widespread problem surely remains on any reckoning.[24]

20. Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History* (New York: Seabury, 1980), p. 85.

21. An illuminating recent discussion of Harold Bloom's influential notion of 'strong misreading', as a particular reading that can powerfully commend itself and oust alternatives, is Hugh S. Pyper, 'The Bible in Bloom', in his *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), pp. 68-75.

22. Greenberg, 'On the Political Use of the Bible', directs his critique towards those within modern Israel who are happy with militarist construals of Scripture in the service of nationalism (and of course Walter Brueggemann regularly targets comparable American approaches). Greenberg's essay concludes with an articulation of rabbinic principles for reading Scripture that would count, in Christian terminology, as a 'rule of faith'. Islam has comparable difficulties with violently minded Islamists in the interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith.

23. For Jews and Christians such disciplines are classically embodied in a 'rule of faith' (whatever precisely one calls it).

24. It must still be acknowledged that the language of the biblical text remains, in a real sense, 'dangerous'. For some general reflections on this issue in relation to another famously difficult text, see my 'Living Dangerously: Genesis 22 and the Quest for Good Biblical Interpretation', in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 181-97.

Rethinking the Basic Conceptuality of Election

In addition to the recent highlighting of the problem of violence, the classic Enlightenment critique, that election entails a particularity that is incompatible with a truly universal deity, also remains alive and flourishing. One rather striking example from an eminent biblical scholar, concerned with the continuing significance of the Old Testament for Christian faith, is the following account by Rolf Knierim:

> The exclusionary election theology[25] contradicts the Old Testament concept of God's universal, indivisible justice, and that the violation of universally equal justice, especially by violence, is sinful... Also, by subjecting the theology of creation to the theology of exclusionary election, it discredits the claim that Yahweh is truly and justifiably the universal deity. Lastly, it represents the most serious theological perversion of the notion of God and, thus, the most serious among all possible and actual similarly sinful theologized ideologies... For decisive reasons, the theology of creation is not only the widest framework of the Old Testament theology; it is the basis of and criterion for the validity of Israel's or any election.[26]

On the one hand creation (universal) trumps election (particular). On the other hand, because the particularity of election denies the requirements of justice it can be no more than a self-serving tribal construct inappropriately foisted on others in the much-misused name of God ('sinful theologized ideologies'). Once Knierim has set up the issue in these terms, there is a certain force to his critique; though of course there remain other significant ways of construing the relationship between 'universal' and 'particular'.[27]

25. By this Knierim means that the concept of election which he sees as predominant in the Old Testament, especially in the Pentateuch and Joshua, whereby Israel's election is not for the sake of humanity, but rather of benefit to Israel at the expense of others. The status of other nations as blessed (rather than cursed) is not the purpose of Israel's election but the result of their favourable ('blessing') stance towards Israel. So election favours Israel and others are only favoured if they too favour Israel: all is for Israel's benefit. Although I have substantial exegetical agreement with Knierim regarding the interpretation of the crucial Gen. 12.3 (see below, n. 32), I think that the key interpretative issues can be otherwise, and better, expressed.

26. Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Method and Cases* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p.452.

27. For some of the problems with Knierim's approach to election see Jon D. Levenson's review essay, 'Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method, Cases*', *Religious Studies Review* 24/1 (1998), pp. 39-42; also, more generally, Jon D. Levenson, 'The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism', in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 143-69.

It should also be noted that a difficulty with the particularism of Israel's election is by no means a purely modern problem, even if it was the Enlightenment and its intellectual legacy that has repeatedly highlighted it. The Emperor Julian ('the Apostate') in the fourth century articulated precisely this problem in his own way. Speaking as a Hellene, Julian asked:

> For if he is the God of all of us alike and the creator of all, why did he neglect us?[28]

Indeed, it is a problem that one should probably expect to be articulated in any age. For example, a scholar such as David Clines, who generally embraces the postmodern[29] (a frame of reference which regularly includes a renewed appreciation of the significance of the particular), does not for that reason abandon the time-honoured and 'modern' critique of the particularity of election within Israel's scriptures:

> How can we modern readers of the Bible cope with the fact that the God represented in the Bible is a national deity? If you adopt the point of view of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, God is not experienced as a saving God, and the only words you will hear addressed to you are words of reproach and threat.[30]

Clearly, a major difficulty in understanding the biblical conception of election is finding the right frame of reference for it. The problematizing of the particular in the light of the universal undoubtedly has on its own terms a certain logic which can appear compelling. But its terms, which all too often depend upon a somewhat abstract rationality, are not the only terms. So I wish to propose an alternative conceptuality for thinking about election. I realize that there is an obvious danger in focussing on any one conceptuality, since it may fail to do justice to the complexity of the notion in question. So I make my proposal heuristically, recognizing that qualifications and other conceptualities may also be necessary as one considers the biblical text, but hoping that the proposal may nonetheless have sufficient sharpness and breadth

28. *Contra Galilaeos* 106d; conveniently cited and discussed in John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (STAC, 23; Tübingen: Mohr–Siebeck, 2004), pp. 333, 339.

29. See David J.A. Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern* (2 vols.; JSOTSup, 292, 293; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

30. David J.A. Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World* (Biblical Seminar, 51; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 100. Walter Brueggemann, 'Election', in his *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 61-64 (63), by contrast, recognizes the renewed value that can be given to particularity in a postmodern context: 'the claim for chosenness is doubtlessly an affront to "universal reason" that eschews all particularity... Indeed, one can make the case that the long, brutal history of anti-Semitism in Western culture is the venomous attempt to eradicate that claim of particularity upon which the Bible stands or falls'.

of applicability to constitute a real alternative to the above universal/particular antithesis.

My preferred conceptuality is expressed in the words of Jesus in Luke's depiction: 'From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required' (Lk. 12.48). I prefer this axiom as depicting the essence of election for various reasons.

First, the words make excellent sense as a free-standing axiom (and arguably may once have been such prior to their use by Jesus).[31] In context, however, they illuminate the situation of a master who varies his punishment of disobedient slaves according to the slave's grasp of what was required of them. Differential treatment by the master relates to differential understanding, capacity and behaviour by the slave. Since the language of master and slave has extensive resonances in both testaments with God's relationship with Israel and the Church, it can be a natural move, when trying to think synthetically, to utilize these words heuristically as an axiom for the construal of the Bible more generally (in a way somewhat analogous to Jesus' famous summary key to the law and prophets as a whole in terms of love of God and of neighbour, Mt. 22.34-40). Moreover, the passive verbs 'has been given' (*edothē*) and 'will be required' (*zētēthēsetai*) resonate with the recurrent 'divine passive' in a way that, when the words are taken axiomatically, naturally implies the divine initiative in initially giving and subsequently requiring.

Secondly, the intrinsic linkage between divine gift and divine expectation is explicitly spelled out in relation to election in at least two prime passages in Israel's scriptures (both of which, interestingly, use *yada'* of YHWH's initiative rather than *bahar*). On the one hand, Amos 3.2 is regularly, and surely rightly, taken as epitomizing a prophetic understanding of election, which is that the gift of special knowledge of and by God brings heightened responsibility, with corresponding heightened culpability for dereliction of duty: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'. On the other hand, within the canonical narrative sequence the first explicit statement of the purpose of YHWH's election of Abraham is given as a prefatory explanation for YHWH's revealing the divine intention for Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham (Gen. 18.17-19);[32] YHWH will give Abraham access to the divine purposes, 'for I have

31. So e.g. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV* (AB, 28A; New York: Doubleday, 1985), pp. 991-92.

32. I realize that many interpreters consider Gen. 12.1-3 to fulfil this purpose. In context, however, YHWH's words are best read as assurance to Abram that his response to YHWH's call will lead not to oblivion but to fruitfulness; the nations' admiration and emulation of Abram and his descendants is not the *purpose* of obedience to YHWH's call

chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice...'; YHWH's choice entails heightened knowledge and enactment of the way of YHWH with its searching moral (and other) requirements.

Thirdly, and more generally, our axiom neatly sums up the relationship between divine gift and divine expectation in relation to Israel which is more commonly expressed as the relationship between *election* (i.e. gift) and *covenant* (i.e. requirement). To be sure, this simplifies various complex issues; on the one hand, the possibly diverse developments of notions of election and covenant within the history of Israelite religion; on the other hand, the diversity of covenants within Israel's scriptures, and the fact that the Sinai covenant which most stresses what is expected of Israel still grounds this in a startling account of mercy when Israel is paradigmatically faithless (Exodus 32–34).[33] Nonetheless, within the canonical collection the Sinai covenant clearly stands as that 'much' which is required of Israel as their appropriate response to YHWH's call that they should be YHWH's 'special' people among all the peoples of the earth (Exod. 19.5-6; Deut. 10.12-16).

Fourthly, it is clear that many passages in Israel's scriptures do not as such make use of this understanding of election as a gift which is to be construed in terms of heightened responsibility and accountability. Moreover, my axiom perhaps does not do justice to those passages that emphasize YHWH's sheer delight in Israel.[34] In both these regards a study of the oracles of Balaam in Numbers 23–24 might be a good test of my thesis.[35] Nonetheless, the important question is surely whether there are any passages that are incompatible with it, or incapable of being informed by it; in my judgment there are no such passages, though I remain open to persuasion otherwise.

but its desirable (to Abram) *consequence*. See my *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 141-61.

33. This is the theological issue at the core of my *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), esp. pp. 84-93. I am heartened to see comparable accounts in Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBCTP; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), pp. 301-307; and Rolf Rendtorff, '"Covenant" as a Structuring Concept in Genesis and Exodus', in his *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology* (trans. Margaret Kohl; OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 129-31, and his *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. David Orton; Leiden: Deo, 2005), p. 63.

34. This is an important emphasis (among many others) in Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

35. The oracles depict YHWH's indefeasible commitment to, delight in and support of, Israel in a steady crescendo, with not a word as to Israel's obligations. Nonetheless, the Balaam material is contextualized within Numbers where Israel constantly falls under divine judgment for its failures in obedience.

Fifthly, it can help to consider election in terms of 'much is expected of those to whom much is given' because it relates to an unarguable and inescapable fact of life—that many of the things that matter most are very unequally distributed among human beings. Intelligence and beauty, both of which are central concerns to many, are given in the womb in unpredictable and utterly diverse ways. The place and time of birth and upbringing are constant differential factors over which people in their early years have no control. Many of the conditions and events that most shape life—love, health, success, accident, injustice—can happen in ways that owe little or nothing to either design or desert. Human life, both corporate and individual, is inescapably shaped by particularities of time, place, genetics, cultural inheritance and circumstance which resist abstract universalizing—however much certain universalizing principles and practices may indeed be appropriate and necessary in many contexts. Moreover Israel's canonical writers in general do not shrink from ascribing these imbalances to God; this is, for example, central to an understanding of the story of Cain and Abel in the Hebrew text,[36] where YHWH's unequal response to Cain and Abel and their sacrifices is not to be rationalized but embodies an underlying principle that, in Jon Levenson's neat phrase, 'not every inequity is an iniquity'.[37] Throughout history, some people (be it national, group, individual) have been and are more 'favoured' or 'gifted' than others.[38]

How then should people understand this and act appropriately? In the light of Jesus' axiom, being more 'favoured' is to be 'given' more, and should be understood as entailing heightened responsibility to the giver (the creating God), so as to be expressed in appropriate service. In such a context, the notion of divine election of a particular people is far from being an aberration unbecoming to a universal deity. Rather it makes a particular people the

36. But not in LXX, and in much subsequent commentary which follows the lead of the LXX in rationalizing YHWH's preference in terms of some failure on Cain's part (in LXX to do with the dividing-up of the sacrifice, Gen. 4.7). See Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, pp. 93-94.

37. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 75. Levenson's book is the most searching account of election to have been published in recent years. Although Levenson does not utilize any general axiom, let alone that which I propose here, his own account of the deep meaning of election resonates strongly with my heuristic proposal; so, for example, 'the larger theological point is that the trials of the righteous (cf. the "much that is expected") serve to demonstrate not God's injustice, as many think to be the case, but quite the opposite, the fairness of his choices (cf. the "much that is given")... The trials of the righteous mediate the contradiction between God's grace and his justice' (p. 139).

38. Interestingly, the emphasis within the story of Cain and Abel is upon Cain, the unfavoured, and what is expected of the one to whom, as it were, little has been given. See Moberly, 'Is Monotheism Bad for You?', pp. 106-12.

embodiment of a vocation greater than itself, to display the priorities of God in human life. In an extended way it simultaneously intensifies and transforms the unequal particularities of all life, in such a way as to charge those heightened inequalities with heightened responsibilities, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Jews and Christians differ not on the vocation of a particular people, but on how that people is constituted in relation to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Conclusion

I would like to summarize and conclude with some (further) grand, sweeping and (I hope) provocative observations. Apart from its heuristic usefulness in enabling a sharper perception of the content of Scripture, my proposed axiom has at least two more general strengths.

In intellectual terms it provides, among other things, a way of escaping from some of the limitations of the language and conceptuality of human rights. This is a different kind of eighteenth-century heritage, one that has indeed often been valuable; it helps minority groups and individuals to resist manipulative or predatory governmental regimes; and historically rights have regularly been combined with responsibilities. Nonetheless, it is, as far as I can see, becoming increasingly problematic, as the intrinsic philosophy of rights becomes ever more convoluted and seemingly less enabling of robust ethical awareness and practice. For it is becoming increasingly difficult to give good answers to questions such as: What count as rights, and why? How do rights relate to responsibilities (when some claim the former and neglect the latter), and why? Who determines any controverted questions about rights, and on what basis? When that status and value which humans wish for themselves ('rights') is reconceived in terms of gift that is inseparable from moral expectation, the self is intrinsically located not only in relation to others but also within a dynamic of growth or diminution. Such a biblically derived understanding of the human person has, quite simply, greater potential for living well than has its eighteenth-century alternative or its *epigones*.

In existential terms, the principle that much is expected of those to whom much is given can be appropriated in varying ways by both the non-believer and believer. For the non-believer (especially in those contexts where the influence of Jewish and Christian conceptions of humanity linger, often unrecognized) it can strengthen a common intuition that the human person is intrinsically moral and that human fulfilment is realized not through selfish self-appropriations but rather through generous and compassionate use of whatever one is and has; or challenge the failure to recognize that this is the case. For the believer, there are the same dynamics as for the non-believer, only heightened and enriched by the recognition that the dynamics are rooted

in the will and delight of the Creator, relationship with whom can be ever furthered through such living which becomes growth in love and trust. Either way, quite simply, life becomes richer and deeper.

It is a pleasure to write this in honour of Walter Brueggemann, whose writings have helped the Old Testament come alive for countless people.

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